

J. R. SMITH

Some have asked why "The J. R. Smith Elementary school?" There are two reasons. Mr. Smith's love for the Heber Valley where he was born and his dedication to education in the state of Utah.

James Richard Smith was born in a log cabin located on the corner of what is now the southeast corner of 5th North and Main Street. There was a barn to the east and the pasture and farmland to the north and east. Mr. Smith's parents were married in the Nauvoo Temple and planned to come west but were asked by Brigham Young to remain at Mt. Pisca until all the wagons were checked to be sure they would be able to withstand the long trek to what is now Salt Lake City. The family arrived in Utah about the same time the handcart pioneers came. Later Thomas C. Smith, the father, was asked to go to the Heber Valley to help colonize the area. The log cabin belonging to the Smiths was the first log cabin with a regular roof. The earlier ones were sod or mud covered.

There were 10 children in the Smith family and James Richard was the youngest. When his sister, Mary, passed away, she left two small boys who were taken in and grew up in the Smith household.

Young James Richard, "JR" as friends called him, was determined to get an education. He earned his high school diploma at Brigham Young University. He then went to the University of Utah to get his Bachelor of Science degree. While completing this work, he was the secretary to Dr. Kingsbury, president of the University of Utah. He also joined the first fraternity on the University of Utah campus. He worked as a house manager for his board and room. He graduated in 1902.

From 1908 to 1911, he labored in the German Mission for the L.D.S. Church. When he returned he married Gertrude Pearson and in the fall of 1911 they moved to Heber City where "JR" was principal of the high school and his wife was a teacher. He held this position for four years and then spent another four years as principal of the Panaca, Nevada high school.

Just before the Armistice was signed in 1918, he came to Salt Lake City securing a position as the theology teacher for the old L.D.S. College. He remained in this service until the college was abolished in the early 1930's. While teaching at the L.D.S. College he obtained his Master's Degree in psychology. He first taught in the Salt Lake City Schools at Bryant Junior High and later at the new South High until he was made principal of the Longfellow School.

In the late 1930's and early 1940's he became a leader of the teachers of Utah and served as president of the Utah Teachers' Association. While leading the teachers, he became interested in retirement programs for teachers. Since teachers were not included in the original Social Security program, it was necessary to develop a plan, make sure it was actuarially sound, prepare a bill for the Utah Legislature, and then lobby for the bill's passage. This was the first such bill to pass in Utah and was the basis for the retirement program for all Utah Public Employees.

Along with his interest in retirement, he also was concerned about merit rating of teachers. He had attended the University of California at Berkeley using this subject as the basis for his doctorate thesis. While this was completed and accepted, a year's residency was required to complete his PhD. He chose to wait until the retirement program was established. While working on speeches for the National Education Association, his health broke. He delivered several speeches, but was never able to take the time and expend the energy to complete his PhD. He was listed in "Who's Who In American Education."

After the L.D.S. College closed, Mr. Smith was requested to write a textbook for the new seminary program that was being started for the L.D.S. youth training plan. "The Message of the New Testament" was the first book written and used for many years.

Mr. Smith continued until age 70 as principal for the Longfellow School and after retirement from the Salt Lake District, he became a textbook salesman for 5 large publishing companies covering Utah, Idaho, Arizona, and parts of Nevada and Wyoming. He continued in this work until the day before he died, March 24, 1958, of a cerebral hemorrhage.

Mr. Smith always loved the Heber Valley where he had herded cows and tended bees. It had been the dream of his grandchildren that the family would find a way to return to the land. Through the years numerous offers were refused. It was only when an agreement was reached that the land would be used for a school and that the school be named for Mr. Smith, that the family agreed to sell. This appeared would be suitable use of the property and recognition for a man who gave so much to others.

Written by his daughter

Sarah Thompson

JR Smith Hist.